Do Tourists Do What They Say They Do? An Application of the Cultural Consensus and Cultural Consonance Models to Tourism Research

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ABSTRACT

The correspondence (or lack thereof) between what people say they do and what they actually do has long been of interest to social researchers. Tourism researchers have not been immune to this research conundrum and have sought to address it, giving particular attention to inconsistencies in tourists' behavior in areas such as consumer behavior and destination loyalty. Missing from the tourism literature are models that allow for systematic comparisons between cultural models, self-reported behavior, and actual tourism behavior, thus making predictions of future behavior more accurate. In this paper I discuss the potential applications of the Cultural Consensus and Cultural Consonance models using an American college travel phenomenon – Spring Break – as a case study. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the role culture plays in tourism behavior and have important practical implications for the areas of tourism destination marketing and marketing segmentation.

Keywords: *cultural consensus, cultural consonance, spring break, tourist behavior*

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The correspondence (or lack thereof) between what people say they do and what they actually do has long interested social researchers (Chick, 2000; D'Andrade, 1987; Mills, 1940). Tourism researchers have not been immune to this research conundrum and have sought to address it, giving particular attention to inconsistencies in tourists' behavior in areas such as consumer behavior (Swarbrooke & Horner, 1999) and destination loyalty (Opperman, 2000). As many tourism scholars have recognized, however, missing from the tourism literature are models that allow for systematic comparisons between intended and actual tourism behavior, thus making predictions of future tourist behavior more accurate (Moutinho, 1993).

Spring Break (SB) is a college vacation period that corresponds to an annual spring migration of thousands of North-American college students towards warm vacation hotspots and is usually associated with extreme types of behavior (e.g., Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998). Existing research has relied almost exclusively on self-reported survey data (e.g., Sönmez et al., 2006), perpetuating the media-driven stereotypical image of SB as a Spring Bacchanal (Marsh, 2006). More recent research, however, has challenged these findings and suggested that, while cultural consensus (i.e., the degree to which a group of individuals agrees on cultural beliefs and practices - Romney, Weller & Batchelder, 1986) exists in regard to what

SB is, spring breakers' behavior may not correspond to their cultural perceptions of SB. That is to say, while cultural consensus may exist among spring breakers, cultural consonance (i.e., the degree to which culture is matched by individual behavior – Dressler & Bindon, 2000) may not. The present study contrasted SB behavior in a typical SB destination (Panama City Beach, Florida) with spring breakers' cultural beliefs and self-reported behaviors regarding the same phenomenon using the Cultural Consensus and Cultural Consonance models.

The Cultural Consensus Model (CCM), developed by Romney, Weller, and Batchelder (1986, see also Romney, 1999) provided a much needed theoretical framework – cultural consensus theory – with which to compare cultural beliefs and cultural prescriptions (i.e., behavioral models of conduct). The CCM draws on a cognitive approach to culture (defined as shared knowledge which an individual must possess in order to function in a given social structure – Goodenough, 1967) and provides a theoretical and methodological framework through which emic cultural beliefs and prescriptions can be extracted and analyzed scientifically. Use of the CCM has known widespread use not only in cultural anthropology (the discipline wherein it originated), but in other fields of inquiry such as organizational behavior (e.g., Caulkins & Hyatt, 1999), gerontology (e.g., Schrauf, 2009), and general medicine (e.g., Smith et al., 2004). Only very recently has the CCM been applied to tourism research, and a few pioneering scholars have successfully used it to study local attitudes to tourism development (Gatewood & Cameron, 2009), backpacker culture (Paris, 2009), college students' tourism behavior (Ribeiro, 2009), and sense of place in a tourism setting (Kerstetter et al., 2010). Thus far, however, no study has sought to incorporate actual tourism behavior – measured by means other than self-report – into cultural consensus analyses in the tourism scholarship and elsewhere.

Work by Dressler et al. (e.g. 1998, 2005, 2007) extended the cultural consensus model further to include the notion of cultural consonance, that is, the degree to which actual behavior matches cultural beliefs. The Cultural Consonance Model (CCoM) expands the CCM to correlate cultural beliefs with behavioral practices, ordinarily measured through self-report, and it is the degree of such correlation that emerges as cultural consonance. To the best of my knowledge, no study of tourism to date has used the CCoM.

In this paper I discuss the potential applications of the CCM and CCoM to tourism research using a well-known American college travel phenomenon – Spring Break (SB) – as a case study. Existing SB research has relied almost exclusively on self-reported survey data (e.g., Sönmez et al., 2006; Smeaton et al., 1998), perpetuating the media-driven stereotypical image of SB as a "Spring Bacchanal" (Marsh, 2006). More recent research, however, has challenged these findings and suggested that, while cultural consensus exists in regard to what SB is, spring breakers' behavior may not correspond to their cultural perceptions of SB (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008; Ribeiro & Chick, 2009). That is to say, while cultural consensus may exist among spring breakers, cultural consonance may not. Using a mixed-methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), this study sought to provide an objective account of spring breakers' behavior in a typical SB destination (Panama City Beach, Florida), and contrast it with spring breakers' cultural beliefs and self-reported behaviors using the CCM and CCoM frameworks. Additional objectives were to a) further existing research on cultural consensus and cultural consonance; and b) explore the potential applications of the CCM and CCoM to tourism research.

METHODS

The present study sought to measure and contrast the following constructs:

SB cultural consensus (SB culture), i.e., the normative beliefs and prescriptive behaviors associated with SB by a group of individuals (spring breakers) and the degree to which they share and agree with such beliefs/behaviors;

Self-reported SB cultural consonance, i.e., the degree to which SB culture is matched by individual SB behavior(s), as reported by the individuals themselves; and

Objectively measured SB cultural consonance, i.e., the degree to which SB culture is matched by individual SB behavior(s), measured by means other than self-report.

Two main hypotheses drove this study:

H_1: Cultural consensus among spring breakers in PCB is significant; i.e., a SB culture in PCB exists; and

H_2: Cultural consonance based on self-reported behavioral accounts of SB is higher than cultural consonance based on objective records of behavior of SB.

The data presented in this article were collected during SB in PCB in March 2010 with the aid of a research assistant. Spring breakers' objective behavioral data was collected using ethnographic (participant observation) and ethological (random spot sampling and continuous monitoring – Bernard, 2006) methods. Cultural and self-reported behavioral data was collected using freelisting (n=80) (Ribeiro 2009) and rank order questionnaires (n=224) (Dressler, 2005; Weller, 2007). SB behavioral data was collected both in regard to behaviors occurring in public spaces (i.e., the beach), and overall SB behaviors. Following previous research and preliminary fieldwork, data collection points (n=24) were situated in areas of greatest SB activity in PCB and were randomized following an incomplete block design (BIB) with (λ) = 2 (Weller & Romney, 1988) to allow for data to be collected from each location at least twice. The informal version of the CCM (Weller, 2007), derived for rank data, was used to investigate the degree of cultural consensus among spring breakers in regard to both SB beliefs and SB behaviors. Results were explored and contrasted using a variety of statistical methods (descriptive statistics, principal component analysis, MANOVA, bivariate correlations) in order to investigate the relationship between SB culture and self-reported and objectively measured SB behaviors.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported by the results of this study. While there was no overall cultural consensus for both SB beliefs and SB behaviors, results showed moderate consensus among males (ratio of 1^{st} to 2^{nd} eigenvalue = 3.28) and females (ratio of 1^{st} to 2^{nd} eigenvalue = 3.78) in regard to SB beliefs; and marginal consensus among males (ratio of 1^{st} to 2^{nd} eigenvalue = 3.05) and strong consensus among females (ratio of 1^{st} to 2^{nd} eigenvalue = 4.17) in regard to SB behaviors. These results point towards within-gender agreement in regard to both SB cultural beliefs (i.e., what spring breakers think SB in PCB is about) and culturally prescribed SB behaviors (i.e., what spring breakers think other spring breakers do during SB in PCB), but in all likelihood males and females disagree with what they consider to be typical SB beliefs and behaviors, that is to say, they do not share the same cultural model(s). Furthermore, females

appear to be more culturally knowledgeable than males in regard to SB behaviors. Hypothesis 2 was not supported by the results of this study. While overall self-reported cultural consonance scores were high for both males (r = .82) and females (r =.78), beach only self-reported cultural consonance was lower than beach only objectively measured cultural consonance. Females reported higher degrees of cultural consonance than males in regard to both self-reported and objectively measured beach only SB behaviors (Table 1).

Table 1 - Male and female Spring Break cultural consonance scores

	overall SB behaviors		beach only SB behaviors[1]		beach only SB behaviors[2]	
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
self-reported cultural consonance	0.82	0.78	**	0.40	**	0.93
objectively measured cultural consonance	*	*	0.40	0.66	**	0.99

[1] all behaviors (n=20); [2] corresponding behaviors only (n=5); * not calculated; ** not significant

In regard to overall self-reported SB behaviors, one factor MANOVA procedures revealed statistically significant differences (Wilk's Λ = .67, $F(20, 85) = 2.12$, $p < .01$) between males and females only in regard to a small number of SB behaviors (5 out of 20, or 25%). Namely, male and female spring breakers reported significant behavioral differences in the last 24 hours preceding questioning only in regard to *Walking on the Beach* (p = .02), *Having Sex* (p = .04), *Going to the Beach* (p = .01), *Tanning* ($p < .01$), and *Smoking* (p = .03). Males reported higher behavioral averages than females in regard to *Walking on the Beach*, *Having Sex*, *Going to the Beach*, and *Smoking*, whereas females reported *Tanning* more frequently than males in the last 24 hours. Interestingly, there were no significant behavioral gender differences in regard to behaviors such as *Drinking*, *Being Crazy*, *Doing Drugs*, *Getting Drunk*, and *Partying*.

DISCUSSION

In the present study spring breakers' culturally prescribed SB behaviors not only matched the SB stereotype much more closely than SB cultural beliefs, but there was a greater degree of consensus among spring breakers in regard to what spring breakers do in PCB than in regard to what people think SB in PCB is about. Furthermore, objectively measured behavior followed cultural prescriptions (i.e., normative behaviors) more closely than self-reported behavior, particularly among female spring breakers. There was a disconnect between culturally held beliefs and culturally prescribed behaviors, as there was a disconnect between self-reported and objectively measured behavior; there was also dissonance (particularly for male spring breakers) between culturally prescribed SB behaviors and self-reported SB behaviors. In summary, it appears that these results

validate the strand of anthropological theory known as cultural materialism famously championed by Marvin Harris (e.g., 1964, 2001). Ultimately, it matters little what people tell you they do; it is what they actually do that matters, as behavior more accurately reflects cultural patterns (Harris, 1968, 2001). As Harris (1975) himself put it in a famous eponymous article: perfect knowledge of the rules one must know in order to act like a native cannot lead to a knowledge of how natives act. Or, more succinctly, actions speak louder than words (Gatewood, 1985). These results also add another layer of complexity to my earlier findings concerning SB culture and behavior and contribute to the extant SB literature in a number of ways.

Results revealed not a single SB culture, but two, sharply divided among gender lines. This was true for both cultural SB beliefs and culturally prescribed SB behavior, which challenges my earlier findings that pointed towards shared cultural beliefs and behavior among male and female spring breakers (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008). Nonetheless, these findings lend support to earlier SB studies that showed inter-gender differences in regard to SB behavioral intentions, attitudes, and motivations (Josiam et al., 1998; Maticka-Tyndale et al, 1998; Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2006). This study also highlighted the differences between male and female knowledge of SB: female spring breakers were not only more knowledgeable concerning SB culture (beliefs and behavior), but they tended to more closely approximate cultural beliefs in their behavior than males.

Furthermore, whereas previous SB studies did not report significant differences between male and female (self-reported) behavior in regard to sexual activity and alcohol consumption (Apostolopoulos et al., 2002; Josiam et al. 1998; Maticka-Tyndale & Herold, 1997; Mattila et al., 2001), this study did find significant gender differences in regard to sexual activity (males reporting higher frequency then females), as it did in regard to other overall behaviors such as walking to and on the beach, tanning, and smoking. Conversely, no significant gender differences were found in relation to alcohol consumption, with both genders reporting extremely high frequencies. 206

These results also reveal the fallibility of self-reported behavioral measures. The findings presented in this article seriously question the validity of existing SB survey-based research that requested spring breakers to estimate the frequency of their SB behaviors for a period longer than the previous 24-48 hours. Based on the findings of this study, as well as ethnographic data, I doubt that any SB recall data beyond the aforementioned time frame can be regarded as anything other than educated guesswork, particularly when conducted in typical SB destinations, where alcohol consumption is not only daily but constant.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study validated and extended the use of the CCM and CCoM in tourism research by including behavioral measures acquired through means other than self-report. The results illustrate a disconnect between culture and behavior, which I labeled "cultural dissonance" (Ribeiro & Chick, 2009). In this particular case, it is interesting to note that objectively measured behavior follows cultural prescriptions (i.e., normative behaviors) more closely than self-reported behavior, which supports a wealth of research in the social sciences that stresses the behavioral implications of cultural models (e.g., D'Andrade & Strauss, 1994). Furthermore, these results also reveal the fallibility of self-reported behavioral measures, something tourism scholars have long been attuned to (Moutinho, 1993). This study also highlighted the differences between male and female tourism knowledge of SB: female spring breakers were not only more knowledgeable concerning SB culture (beliefs and behavior), but

they tended to more closely approximate cultural beliefs in their behavior than males. At the same time, there was little difference in self-reported "typical" SB behaviors between males and females (e.g., alcohol and drug consumption), which should be worthy of further inquiry.

Significance to Industry

The findings of this study have important implications for the areas of destination marketing and marketing segmentation. For instance, destinations who wish to analyze and/or change their image may look to the CCoM as a good stepping stone to do so; and marketeers may also want to consider using the CCM as a market segmentation method. Lastly, this study highlighted the benefits that can be accrued through the use of anthropological research methods to tourism research for both scholars and practitioners.

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